

COAL-TO-LIQUIDS PLANT NUDGES US TOWARD A SOLUTION

Great Falls for the past couple of years has straddled an odd economic development dilemma at the southeastern corner of town.

Landowners and developers are interested in pursuing housing and retail projects, while supporters of the nearby Malmstrom Air Force Base have their sights set on procuring a new flying mission that would revive the base's abandoned runway and diversify the base's functions.

The two efforts have been at a kind of impasse, because development within safety zones off the ends of the out-of-use runway was believed to be detrimental to chances of reopening the runway.

Two things have happened in the past week that might begin to nudge the city off of the dime.

One is the indication from a high Air Force official that the military is serious about pursuing a large coal-to-liquid fuel plant at Malmstrom.

Unless some kind of neighborhood land swap can be arranged to move the proposed plant, such a plant probably would eradicate the last hopes for reviving the runway, because the plant would need some of the land occupied at present by the runway and related infrastructure.

The other development this week is release of the first draft of a thorough study taking stock of land and restrictions off both ends of the mothballed runway.

The plant being discussed could employ as many as 2,500 people during the multi-year construction phase, and hundreds of people — as many as a thousand by one estimate — for decades after that. Starting as early as 2011, it could produce 20,000 to 30,000 barrels a day of synthetic fuel, most of it for use by the Air Force, which is the military's biggest energy consumer.

The plant would produce virtually no pollution, and it could have spin-off products such as sequestered carbon dioxide for oil-well injection and waste heat that could generate as much as a hundred megawatts of electricity, according to Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who met Tuesday with William Anderson, assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, environment and logistics.

The military has made a priority of seeking ways to wean itself from foreign-produced energy. Schweitzer said Anderson approached him about the possibilities for Malmstrom after hearing the governor speak at an energy conference in New York.

"It would be a dream come true," he said.

And it doesn't take an expert in probabilities to see that development of a long-lived plant of that magnitude — privately owned and operated — would surely be a better bet to take than a hoped-for flying mission at Malmstrom.

Anderson underscored the odds Wednesday in Great Falls when he said: "The Air Force has no flying mission identified either today or in the future for Malmstrom."

And if that's not unequivocal enough, he went on to say that it would cost "many, many millions of dollars" to bring the runway up to speed and bring back its supporting tower, lights and navigation aids.

Montanans might keep pushing for a new flying mission, he said, "but I can only speak on reality, and the fact is there are no flying missions for the runway."

That's not to say more can't be done for the Montana Air National Guard — on which, by the way, millions more dollars have been spent in recent years.

For example there remains hope for an "active-associate wing" in which active duty airmen augment the existing MANG flyers and support.

Supporters of that approach see it as a possible foot in the door toward reactivating Malmstrom's runway.

We suppose the best of both worlds would be another possibility, which Committee of 80 stalwart Warren Wenz said the Air Force's Anderson didn't rule out: swapping land to allow building the plant a little farther away from the core of the base and preserving the runway.

However, such swaps can be expensive and hopelessly complicated — more so than many developers are willing to accommodate.

A federally contracted coal-to-liquids plant is still a long way from any kind of reality, but it is real — and significant — enough that Great Falls would be foolish not to support its pursuit.

If something can be worked out along the way to preserve Malmstrom's runway, all the better. Then the Great Falls Development Authority's runway study will help facilitate decisions related to that, too.

The development dilemma at the southeast corner of town still exists, but some shifting priorities and promising solutions are beginning to emerge.